

VOICES FROM TRANSITION: LITERARY REFLECTIONS ON POSTSOCIALIST LIFE IN GERMAN AND ESTONIAN CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE

Aigi Heero

Tallinn University

Abstract. This article examines the literary representation of the transition era and its effects on individual and collective identities in Daniela Krien’s “Muldentäl” and selected examples of Estonian contemporary literature. Focusing on the concept of the “losers of the reunification” (*Wendeverlierer*) in former East Germany and the analogous experiences in postsocialist Estonia, the study explores how these works portray the disorientation and adaptation of people during and after the collapse of socialist regimes. The analysis highlights the resilience of individuals as they try to fill the “void” (Tlostanova) left by the dismantling of old social structures, offering insights into the broader human experience of loss, transformation, and the search for stability in postsocialist societies.¹

Keywords: Daniela Krien, “Muldentäl”, transition era, losers of reunification, East Germany, contemporary German literature, contemporary Estonian literature

¹ The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and publication of this article. The article is part of the project “Translating Memories: The Eastern European Past in the Global Arena” that has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (Grant agreement No 853385).

Introduction

The fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 was an epochal event that symbolically embodied the collapse of the entire communist system in Eastern Europe. The events of 1989 had far-reaching effects on the disintegrating Soviet Union and other Eastern Bloc countries, where citizens also fought for political freedom and democracy. However, it was not only political changes but also economic restructuring and social challenges that these nations faced after the end of the Cold War (Sztompka 2004: 162–166; Corsten *et al.* 2016: 46–53).

In the case of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), the establishment of a market economy-based society may have been less radical than in other states of the former Eastern Bloc, as it largely took place within the framework of the constitutional state of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) (Wiesenthal 1996: 10–12). At the same time, it must be emphasized that the West German state apparatus practically took over the political leadership of the former GDR in the early 1990s. Significant effects of this process include the ongoing discussion about the “winners” and “losers” of reunification, a certain sense of inferiority among East Germans compared to West Germans, and the low proportion of East German leaders among Germany’s political elites (Böick, Lorke 2022: 47–55; Hogwood 2013: 37–38; Thieme, Mannewitz 2021: 208–222). Therefore, the reunification left deep marks on German society and raised profound questions about identity, belonging, and memory (Kowalczuk 2019: 10–17; Lühmann 2021).

Many significant works of contemporary German-language literature deal with the time of reunification and the GDR past in retrospect, employing a wide range of perspectives. In addition to critical discussions of the GDR legacy and depictions of this era as a bleak time under the conditions of a dictatorship, there are also ironically humorous narratives about the absurdities of socialist society, nostalgic reflections on youth in the GDR, and family sagas

in the traditional style. The theme of reunification is also addressed in various literary ways. Notable works here include those by Thomas Brussig, Ingo Schulze, Jana Hensel, Uwe Tellkamp, and Eugen Ruge (Sabrow 2009: 13–19; Leier 2010; Norkowska 2020: 267–271).

The examination of the reunification and post-reunification period in literature is of interest because it not only provides insights into the individual experiences or even identity crises of people during this era but also reflects the social upheavals and collective challenges that accompany such political changes. In fact, many people in former East Germany felt the reunification, after an initial euphoria, to be a painful plunge into the void where they had lost something of their previous lives and certainties. Thus, Madina Tlostanova's concept of the "postsocialist void" or the "leap into the void" can be drawn upon at this point (Tlostanova 2017: 1–21). According to Tlostanova, the collapse of the Eastern Bloc brought the former socialist world into a precarious and insufficiently conceptualized situation – a "void" – which was perceived as such both by the postsocialist countries themselves and by the West. This widespread interpretation of postsocialism as a "void" is dominated by a sense of uncertainty, instability, and disorientation. The "leap into the void", as Tlostanova describes it, refers to the radical jump or sudden change that could be interpreted as a kind of metaphorical plunge into an abyss, where people feel they are losing their identity, connections, and security. After the collapse of the old ideological foundations, new social structures of knowledge and values were established in this void, predominantly following the Western model (Tlostanova 2017: 4–6; Silova *et al.* 2017). Therefore, a process of decolonization or a detachment from the logic of coloniality, which shapes knowledge production in the postsocialist context, is now necessary (Tlostanova 2017: 3–4). One possible way to initiate the process of reinterpreting the (post)socialist legacy is through artistic engagement with the "void" left by the transition. This involves a thorough discussion of the Soviet past. In addition to existing studies, the present discussion should also focus on works

that highlight the transformation period as a difficult or even traumatic transition, with particular emphasis on the *Wendeverlierer* (losers of the reunification). This term originates from the German words *Wende*, meaning ‘turn’ or ‘change’ – specifically referring to the political and social transformations in Germany following reunification – and *Verlierer*, meaning ‘losers’. Initially, it described individuals who felt marginalized or disadvantaged by the rapid changes after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Over time, the term’s connotation has evolved to reflect a broader critique of the socio-economic disparities that emerged between East and West Germany. Thus, *Wendeverlierer* refers to those who were disadvantaged by reunification, in contrast to the winners who benefited from the social upheaval (Müller 2020).

Literature about the ‘losers of reunification’ complements the dominant success stories of German reunification by offering alternative perspectives. It sheds light on the social and economic realities after 1989, illustrating the challenges of transitioning from a socialist to a capitalist system and the resulting social ruptures. This literature critically reflects on the present, showing how the upheavals following reunification brought not only positive changes but also new inequalities and uncertainties. In this context, the term *Ostalgie* should be mentioned. *Ostalgie* combines the German words *Ost* (East) and *Nostalgie* (nostalgia) and emerged as a cultural phenomenon in post-reunification Germany. It reflects a longing for certain aspects of life in the former East Germany (Figus *et al.* 2018). *Ostalgie* is characterized by a retrospective appreciation for certain social values, such as solidarity, which are perceived to contrast with the competitive nature of Western capitalism (Ponzi 2019). This phenomenon can also be understood as an expression of dissatisfaction with the present and a yearning for the supposedly better times of the past (Hyland 2013: 113; Sierp 2009). Thus, literary representations of the transition era can help to appreciate the cultural achievements and everyday life in the GDR without trivializing its political repressions.

The experiences of people in Eastern Bloc countries exhibited parallel developments in many respects. The collapse of the socialist state, the introduction of market principles, and the search for national identity were common issues that arose everywhere. However, it should be emphasized that the experience of the transition as a plunge into instability, uncertainty, and insecurity, or as the “leap” into “postsocialist void”, does not necessarily apply equally to all former Eastern Bloc countries.

For instance, in Estonia, after the end of Soviet occupation and the restoration of the independent republic in 1991, there was no widespread longing for the Soviet past and no pronounced *Ostalgie* for socialism. Instead, the transformation was perceived as a step towards the European Union and NATO, and a return to the Western cultural sphere (see Lauristin *et al.* 1997). It is important to note that this transformation was understood as the restoration of an independent state based on the principle of legal continuity, rather than the creation of a new state. This aspect marks a significant difference from East Germany, where reunification was not based on the restoration of a previous state but rather the absorption of the GDR into the FRG. Therefore, in contrast to the GDR, Estonia’s path was marked by reclaiming its pre-occupation independence, leading to different societal dynamics. The Singing Revolution is regarded as one of Estonia’s greatest achievements in history and is mostly remembered positively (see Šmidchens 2014), although it brought about significant societal changes, such as the collapse of socialist agriculture, the consequences of which and its negative impact on rural life are still felt today (Hänni 2021). Also, the rapid stratification, resulting from the reforms of the 1990s, was first highlighted by 26 Estonian social scientists in 2001. They introduced the term “Two Estonias”, which later inspired another popular term *Teine Eesti* (Second Estonia) to describe the societal divide (Sotsiaalteadlaste avalik pöördumine 2001). In this time, president Arnold Rüütel’s speeches during his office often focused on lack of social cohesion and presence of stratification within contemporary Estonian society

(Jõesalu 2012: 65). This concept of societal division in Estonia parallels the notion of the “losers of the reunification” in the former GDR. Both terms capture the sense of disenfranchisement and inequality experienced by segments of the population following significant political and economic transitions.

The transformation period introduced new and intriguing trends into Estonian literature. For instance, some themes previously considered taboo were addressed, notably the critical examination of the Soviet past (Hinrikus 1997; Hennoste 2018). Literary texts reflecting on the GULAG experience or addressing deportations, forced collectivization, and other historical traumas must also be highlighted (Hinrikus 1997: 33). Estonian literature also includes examples that treat the time immediately before and during the transition as a more or less traumatic period where much was gained but also much was discarded.

The present study analyzes selected examples of the German and Estonian literature about the transformation period, focusing primarily on a work that centers not only on the memory of the GDR but also on the time after reunification. It is Daniela Krien’s “Muldentäl”, a novel consisting of short stories, first published in 2014; an expanded new edition was released in 2020.² Krien (born in 1975) is one of the authors who grew up in the GDR and experienced the political changes herself after reunification.

In the first edition of “Muldentäl”, ten separate stories portray individuals living in the villages and small towns of the former Muldentäl region (now part of the district of Leipzig, Saxony). The use of multiple stories reflects the fragmented and non-linear nature of human memory. Therefore, Krien’s novel in short stories can be compared to intense memory work, in which different stories and memories are captured. As with other memory texts, the stories

² The following edition is used in the present study: Krien, Daniela 2020. *Muldentäl*. Zürich: Diogenes. Quotations from this work are cited in the main text with the page number in parentheses. All quotations are translated into English by the author of this study.

rework, repeat, and recontextualize personal and collective experiences, taking on a timeless, mythic quality through retelling. In line with Annette Kuhn's observation on oral history life stories, these texts may reflect a collective viewpoint, playing a crucial role in shaping collective identities through the act of remembering (Kuhn 2000: 192). Consequently, Krien's stories can be read as a manifestation of collective identity in various forms, capturing the complexity and diversity of shared experiences.

The narratives focus on people who were significantly influenced by both the GDR era and the reunification period. Thereby, various aspects such as social inequality, identity loss, and alienation in society are addressed. All main characters (who the reader knows by their first name such as Marie, Gunnar or Otto) have lost something significant after reunification – whether it is their job, their social status, their family, or their wealth. Some characters are also haunted by shadows of their Stasi past, which still influences their lives today. The period of reunification often appears in these stories as an era of chaos, disorder, collapse, and lawlessness. At the same time, in Krien's stories, the new society constructed according to Western concepts sometimes seems as a space where human connections are dissolved, and only coldness and indifference are experienced. Nevertheless, the protagonists in Krien's stories also attempt to defend themselves against their difficult circumstances. Therefore, the following discussion not only aims to understand the reasons for the downfall experienced by the characters or explore the depth of their situations, but also examines whether the protagonists find ways to overcome these challenges or how they attempt to fill the void that emerged after reunification with meaning and find a new sense of purpose in their lives.

In addition to "Muldentäl", selected examples from contemporary Estonian literature are used to establish a comparative framework that explores the broader postsocialist experience shared by both East Germany and Estonia. These examples provide insights into common themes such as socio-economic displacement, loss,

and adaptation following the collapse of socialist regimes. While authors like Lilli Luuk and Kiwa are briefly discussed, particular focus is given to the works of Mats Traat and Andrus Kasemaa, which deal more thoroughly with the traumatic impact of the collapse of the Soviet agricultural system. The disintegration of rural culture in Estonia after 1991, along with the memory of the kolkhoz era as depicted by Traat and Kasemaa, parallels the experiences of Krien's characters who also witnessed the loss of their way of life. This comparison might offer a deeper understanding of how different societies grappled with the end of socialism and the transformation of their cultural landscapes.

The chaos of transformation

Societal upheavals can profoundly change an individual's life. This is evident in the "Muldentäl" stories of Maren, "Plan B" ("Backup Plan") and Otto, "Sommertag" ("Summer Day").

Maren is an attractive girl around the time of reunification, but as a young single mother without proper training, she needs a "Plan B". The step she takes to improve her financial situation leads her into a very precarious situation: she becomes a prostitute. But she perceives an even deeper fall when she is forced into sex by her pimp who is also a friend from her youth (68). Her fall is contrasted by a flashback to her past, which depicts her encounter with a "manager" from West Germany. He, too, wanted to exploit her sexually, but at that time she was able to say no (70–71).

Otto's story also depicts both personal and societal downfall. It is summarized as follows: "Otto can pinpoint the day his ruin began. It was November 9, 1989. 'Not only did the Wall fall,' he often says, 'but I fell too, flat on my face.'" (106) Immediately after reunification, he was able to save his business and even rise financially. But the consumer euphoria and the opportunity to finally 'live like in the West' quickly ruined his company. The fall is deep and painful. Consequently, Otto sinks even deeper into alcoholism, which

further alienates him from his family and friends. Finally, he commits suicide, hanging himself, falling symbolically into the depths of death (119).

“Der Zigarettensammler” (“The Cigarette Collector”), the story of a homeless man without a name, also illustrates a deep fall. All we know is that he was a mechanic during the GDR era, but now there are no factories “that produce such mechanical stuff as he had done for thirty years. [...] Moreover, he was not bright and had always found it difficult to learn something new.” (195) He is now an alcoholic who begs for cigarettes in front of a grocery shop and no longer remembers who he was or where he came from: “The GDR was his home, mentally, spatially, and altogether.” (193) He dies, similar to Otto, from a fall when he is hit by a cyclist. Thereby he damages his head, and suffers a brain hemorrhage (198).

The symbolic fall of Otto and the Cigarette Collector into death after reunification can be interpreted as an expression of their existential crisis during a time of profound social change. The fall into death symbolizes their experience of disorientation and lostness that many others felt during this time. The fact that both die from a fall can be seen as an expression of their helplessness and powerlessness in the face of the events of reunification. Maren, on the other hand, does not experience a physical fall or death, but her professional and personal situation becomes precarious after reunification. Thus, she also experiences a kind of fall into an uncertain future and the experience of loss, insecurity, and hopelessness.

These three characters therefore experience a double “leap into the void”: first, a moment of disorientation and dissolution of previous certainties following the collapse of the socialist system (Tlostanova 2017: 4–6), and second, a personal downfall or even death.

In other contemporary German-language novels such as Clemens Meyer’s “Als wir träumten” (“As We Were Dreaming”) a similar perspective on the post-reunification environment opens up. In this work, Leipzig is depicted as a city in chaos after reunification, which correlates with the bleak, drug- and violence-dominated lives

of the young protagonists (Meyer 2021: 8–11). The political conflicts in the GDR and complicated family relationships are addressed, as well as the disorientation and fragmentation of a generation caught between two worlds. In recent Estonian literature, we find similar tendencies. Interestingly, it is primarily life in the second half of the 1980s that is portrayed as one of anarchy and lawlessness. This period marked a transition and the gradual collapse of the Soviet system, evoking a sense of ending and uncertainty. For example, Lilli Luuk, in her novella “Kolhoosi miss” (“The Beauty Queen of the Kolkhoz”), describes the bleak and hopeless existence in a kolkhoz in 1988 (Luuk 2022: 25–45), where poverty, alcoholism, and domestic violence prevail. Similarly, in the novel “Kummiliimiallikad” (“Rubber Adhesive Sources”), artist and writer Kiwa portrays the late 1980s as a time of constant narcotic intoxication through rubber adhesive (Kiwa 2021: 14). The world is depicted as one of perpetual, nauseating decline, filled with ecological disasters, criminal activities, and meaningless Soviet rituals, where only alternative music offers a potential escape.

Life in the new reality

In an interesting contrast to the three tragic fates of Maren, Otto, and the Cigarette Collector, the setting of the stories in “Muldentäl” often resembles an advertisement photo. The post-transition living environment appears extremely tidy and clean: houses are charming and well-maintained, attractive people drive expensive cars and earn good money. This contrast sharpens the precarious situation of the protagonists even more: despite this apparent abundance of resources, they cannot really find a place in the new reality. Thus, the newly built society based on the Western model in “Muldentäl” can resemble a place of coldness and alienation. The emotional numbness of Western society is exemplified by the description of the new living and working environment. Workplaces seem sterile and cold – the “disinfection dispensers are filled” and the index

cards “already sorted by appointment sequence” (33), and the relationships between colleagues are characterized by superficiality and feigned friendliness.

Anne’s story “Mimikry” (“Mimicry”) in “Muldentail” vividly depicts how she, as a young woman from the East, faces prejudice in a North Bavarian town. As a dental assistant, she is not allowed to treat a female patient, who claimed that she “has nothing against East Germans, but they have different bacteria than West Germans, and the last time she got a nasty rash afterwards” (43). At the Christmas dinner with colleagues, Anne has to endure tirades about “Ossis” (51). This term, which emerged post-reunification, has evolved from a mere descriptor into a symbol of perceived deviance and collective identity, often associated with negative stereotypes about East Germans (see Schneider 1997). Sadly, Anne receives no support from her supervisor. Consequently, she must conceal her East German origin to navigate the new unified German society. This situation is also reflected in the title of the story, “Mimikry”. In postcolonial theory, the term mimicry is used to describe the dynamics of cultural adaptation and identity masking. According to Homi Bhabha, the colonized subject has no choice but to assimilate or mask themselves and accept the identity constructed for them (Bhabha 1984: 126). In Anne’s case, it means imitating the behaviors of her West German colleagues and thus adopting a Western “shell”. This perspective aligns with Tlostanova’s viewpoint, which suggests that postcolonialism and postsocialism in the Eastern European context are intertwined, leading to the experiences of post-Soviet countries being similar to those of colonized nations subjected to domination (Tlostanova 2017: 17–20). However, according to Paul Cooke, the term “colonization” must be used with caution when analyzing the situation in East Germany, as the experiences of East Germans are markedly different from those in the Middle East. Despite these differences, postcolonial theories resonate with the depiction of the Western takeover of East Germany (Cooke 2003: 293). Cooke uses Ingo Schulze’s novel “Simple Storys” (1998) as an example, arguing

that postcolonial theory is particularly relevant due to Schulze's focus on foreign influences, especially American, on his homeland. For instance, Schulze describes a newly built, shiny petrol station that appears like a UFO in the dark, capturing a sense of foreignness and alienation (Schulze 1998: 67). The novel thus highlights the swift imposition of Western capitalism on the East, representing unification as an Americanization of the former GDR (Cooke 2003: 294).

In the Estonian context, Epp Annus argues that the Soviet occupation can be understood as a form of colonization, introducing the term *sotskolonialism* (socialist colonialism) to describe the specific nature of Soviet domination in Estonia. This framework highlights the unique aspects of Soviet control, distinct from other colonial experiences (Annus 2019: 21–45). However, in addition to that, the rapid transformation and accelerated “westernization” following the Soviet era have also been subjects of scholarly discussion in Estonia (Lauristin, Vihalemm 1998; Jõe 2002; Rämmer 2017, see also Sztompka 2004: 162) and are depicted in literature, such as in the works of Gohar Markosjan-Käsper, an Estonian-Armenian author, who in her novels thematizes the era of transition as a more or less traumatic experience because of rapid “americanization” (see Heero 2021; Heero 2024).

Returning to “Muldental”, it should be noted that feelings of not belonging can be exacerbated when one is already distressed by personal tragedies such as job loss or severe misfortunes, and feels abandoned by the system. Ilko-Sascha Kowalczyk notes that the GDR was a “work society”, meaning that work and collective formed the central focus of a person's life almost completely. The state-owned enterprises and service institutions included not only production facilities but also hospitals, dormitories, holiday resorts, and much more: there was almost nothing in a person's life that was not connected to work. The complete collapse of this system overnight was far more than just the loss of a job – it also meant the loss of social cohesion (Kowalczyk 2019: 138–145). Steffen Mau similarly

argues that the widespread unemployment following reunification in the former GDR was perceived as a collective fate, leading to an identity crisis after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Many people not only lost their jobs but also their sense of identity and social structures. The shock of marketization, the opening of wage scales downward, and discontinuous forms of employment increased pressure and imposed constant (social) stress on job seekers (Mau 2019: 150–165; see also Vogel 1997: 852–853).

This sentiment is clearly reflected in “Muldentail”, where themes of job search and job loss play a crucial role. For instance, through the example of the Cigarette Collector, one could see how the loss of employment fundamentally altered his personality and ultimately led to his fatal downfall. The job center is a central element in several stories, described as a cold and anonymous institution: “Every now and then she [Juliane, the main figure of the story “Versuchung” (“Temptation”) – A.H.] receives invitations from the job center. An invitation that had actually nothing to do with a real invitation. [...] These invitations, if not adhered to, resulted in cuts or cessation of state support.” (85) This example highlights the impersonality of the state system, becoming a symbol of bureaucratic detachment, where human needs and emotions are often disregarded in favor of rigid administrative procedures.

Next to bureaucratic harshness prevailing in the job world, individual despair is depicted. In the story “Versuchung”, reference is made to a sober newspaper report about an incident where a man attacked his counselor at the job center with a knife (103–104), which underscores the extreme frustration and hopelessness experienced by those trapped in the system. This depiction serves to illustrate the broader societal issue of how the new socio-economic order, post-reunification, often marginalizes and alienates individuals, stripping them of their dignity and sense of belonging. In the context of “Muldentail”, this cold and impersonal state system contrasts sharply with the memory of life in the former GDR, remembered as a communal and supportive environment.

In Estonia, the optimism of the Singing Revolution was followed by confusion and a realization that the country had shifted to a market economy. This transition created a new reality for many, particularly for those who had held respected positions during the Soviet era and now faced significant losses. Gohar Markosjan-Käsper explores in her novels this societal change, particularly the challenges faced by Russian speakers who, due to their failure to learn Estonian, found themselves unemployed and in shock after 1991. While she does not criticize Estonian laws, her work highlights the systemic issues encountered by Russian-speaking individuals in navigating the new socio-political landscape (Heero 2024: 160–161). Another example can be found in the Estonian cultural sphere. According to Egge Kulbok-Lattik, following the reconstruction of political institutions after 1991, the intellectuals who had played a crucial role during the Singing Revolution increasingly faded into the background, giving way to the economic and political elite (Kulbok-Lattik 2008: 138–139). This sense of loss is illustrated in novels such as “Kooparahvas läheb ajalukku” (2012) (“The Cavemen Chronicle”)³ by Mihkel Mutt, which captures the shock experienced by intellectuals as they realize that freedom also necessitated acceptance of the new social order and market forces (Mutt 2012: 286–290).

In many ways, the greatest losers of the transition were the representatives of the rural Estonian population who lost their traditional way of life during the rapid societal changes. Valdur Mikita has noted that this loss was largely due to the swift dissolution of a “unique feature of Estonian culture that had persisted for centuries and had already disappeared from Europe several generations ago – the settled way of life of rural people. [...] Even forced collectivization could not completely destroy the traditional way of life.” (Mikita 2012) Thus, in some respects, the Soviet era preserved Estonia’s traditional rural culture, which disintegrated after 1991,

³ Translated into English by Adam Cullen (Mutt, Mihkel 2015. *The Cavemen Chronicle*. Victoria: Dalkey Archive Press.)

although there were no longer independent farms, but only kolkhozes. Already in 1994, Mats Traat published the novel “Kodu on ilus” (“Home Is Beautiful”) in which the effects of land reform are critically reflected. Traat’s work vividly portrays the time of the Singing Revolution, emphasizing the immense sense of community that prevailed (Traat 2011: 574). However, this sense of unity sharply contrasts with the subsequent collapse of the rural living environment. The main character, Kalju, reflects mournfully on his professional achievements as a kolkhoz engineer, while the kolkhoz itself has been dissolved. His family home is undergoing reprivatization, with an arrogant legal owner from Canada threatening eviction (Traat 2011: 563–567). Ilmar Mikiver suggests that, like his contemporaries such as Enn Vetemaa, Mati Unt, or Teet Kallas, Traat often employed subtle irony to criticize the Soviet system. This ironic mode persists in their prose after the collapse of the Soviet Union, providing a nuanced commentary on the societal changes they witnessed. The title “Home Is Beautiful” itself is deeply ironic, as few characters in the novel actually know what to call home (Mikiver 1996). Through his use of irony, Traat underscores the absurdities and harsh realities of the new socio-economic order, juxtaposing the idealized notion of “home” with the fragmented and uncertain lives of his characters.

Filling the void?

Life in the new society, as depicted in Kriens’ stories, offers new freedoms but also leads to a colder and more distant atmosphere where old connections lose their significance. This “void”, created by the transition from a socialist to a capitalist system, can, however, offer something positive. Filling this void by giving drastic events significance is not only a personal triumph but also a sign of resilience, survival strength, and creativity. Similarly, Tlostanova argues that the postsocialist void also opens up alternative ways of thinking and possibilities beyond traditional Western thought, as

evidenced in the activist art of former Eastern Bloc countries (Tlostanova 2017: 31–35). The void provides space for creative development and initiates a search for new identities and life models that do not necessarily conform to Western norms. In “Mimikry”, Anne is forced to deny her true self in her professional environment, but she expresses herself elsewhere. Together with a friend, Mattis, she creates unusual situations in public spaces to irritate Western citizens. For instance, they push away a man’s fully loaded shopping cart in the supermarket, and when he reacts aggressively and rudely, they respond calmly: “So you believe you bought the cart for the one mark you put in? [...] Have you paid for the groceries? Can you show me the receipt?” (39–40). Shaping life as a form of performance helps Anne cope in a world that often feels foreign and alienating. This behavior can also be compared to an East German *Trotzidentität* (defiance identity). Many East Germans suffered from a sense of disadvantage and external control after the reunification. In response to these perceptions, a coping strategy emerged, often referred to in public discourse as a “defiance identity” (Cooke 2003: 302). This identity is characterized by a deliberate distancing from and resistance to the imposed Western norms and values, embodying a sense of stubborn pride in one’s Eastern roots and experiences (Sierp 2009: 48–49; Sieber 2014: 24–25). Therefore, Anne’s subversive acts in “Mimikry” reflect a form of resistance to the Western capitalist system. By questioning the ownership and consumerist logic in the supermarket, Anne challenges the taken-for-granted assumptions of the Western economic order. This act of defiance serves not only as a means of personal empowerment but also as a critique of the superficiality and alienation inherent in the new societal structure.

In the revised edition of “Muldentail” from 2020, Daniela Krien added a new story, “Muldentail II”, which presents a remarkable turn for Maren (the main character of the story “Plan B”) and Thomas (a secondary character in the title story “Muldentail”). They have met, fallen in love, and welcomed a new baby into their family. After a long period of struggle, they have finally managed to build a stable

life and leave their past behind. This positive turn can be interpreted as an exemplary portrayal of the emotional strength and resilience. In “Muldentäl II”, we also encounter other people who, after a long period of uncertainty and struggle for survival, have found a way forward: “They are friendly people. Broken and resurrected like most here.” (217) Thus, the final story of “Muldentäl” represents not only an individual triumph but also a collective journey that appreciates the history and life paths of people in East Germany.

Tlostanova argues that the postsocialist void, created by the collapse of the old system and the uncertainty of the new, can offer opportunities for new ways of thinking and living. This suggests that literature serves not only as a reflection of societal shifts but also as a means of constructing new ways of understanding and coping with the changes brought about by historical transitions. In Krien’s “Muldentäl”, this void is both a source of despair and a space for potential transformation. The characters who navigate this void, like Maren and Thomas, illustrate the resilience and creativity required to rebuild their lives amidst the ruins of the past. Similarly, in Estonian literature, the void left by the collapse of Soviet structures and the rapid westernization is filled with new narratives that seek to redefine identity and community in a changed world.

In this context, Andrus Kasemaa’s novel, composed of short stories, “Au kolhoosikorra!” (2023) (“Hail to the Kolkhoz Order!”) should be mentioned. This work is compiled of twenty thematically interconnected stories, focusing on the everyday experiences of ordinary people who lived in a kolkhoz back in the Soviet time, such as the narrator’s grandfather (Kasemaa 2023: 111). The novel received mixed reviews. According to Hanna Linda Korp and Joosep Norma, Kasemaa gives voice to those whose lives did not significantly improve after the restoration of independence and who, due to the unequal distribution of property and benefits, have lost social mobility, health, access to culture, and other aspects of life that many take for granted (Korp; Norma 2023). Critics like Urmas Vadi note that the novel is inconsistent in content and style, yet

Kasemaa's work returns to the roots of cultural memory, revealing that longing for kolkhoz is not so much about the former way of life, agriculture, or better or worse living conditions but rather about the inherent desire to yearn for and seek out lost time (Vadi 2024). Furthermore, the ironic mode seen in Traat's "Kodu on ilus" becomes apparent here, too: the humorous style hints that the homage to the kolkhoz order is, at least in part, a jest (Müürsepp 2023). Overall, Kasemaa's approach can, in some way, be seen as an attempt to fill the void left by the liquidation of Soviet rural life, valuing the culture and the memories of that era. It should be noted that Daniela Krien's "Muldentäl" employs a similar structure (novel in short stories), a fragmented form that emphasizes memory work. This form, seen in both Krien's and Kasemaa's works, reflects a method of remembering, collecting, and keeping memories, portraying personal and collective stories of resilience and adaptation.

Conclusion

The present study of Daniela Krien's "Muldentäl" illuminates the complexities of navigating transition in East Germany, with selected examples from contemporary Estonian literature included to illustrate that comparable themes and experiences exist in both societies, suggesting possibilities for further comparative exploration. While the historical experiences of the former GDR and Estonia differ significantly, the concepts of the *Wendeverlierer* and *Teine Eesti* (Second Estonia) might offer a compelling point of comparison. Both terms encapsulate the sense of loss and dislocation felt by individuals who struggled to adapt to the new socio-political realities following the collapse of the socialist regimes.

The notion of a "void", as articulated by Tlostanova, is central to understanding these transitions, manifesting in various forms, such as loss of identity, job, social status, or a way of life. In "Muldentäl", Krien explores this void through the personal and collective struggles of individuals in post-reunification East Germany, depicting

the challenges they face in adjusting to a new social order. Similarly, Estonian literature captures this sense of loss in different ways, ranging from the disintegration of rural traditions to the erosion of Soviet-era status of individuals. This void, representing the uncertain landscape of a new society, calls for creative navigation. Rather than glorifying the Soviet past, the works discussed here critically examine it – sometimes through a humorous lens –, revealing the complex processes of adapting to a fundamentally changed reality.

By using a ‘novel in short stories’ structure, authors like Krien and Kasemaa engage in the act of remembering, collecting, and preserving disparate memories. This narrative form creates a mosaic of experiences that reflects the complexities of the transition period while also emphasizing the fragmented and non-linear nature of human memory itself. Through retelling, these narratives take on a timeless quality that contributes to the formation of collective identity, where personal and communal truths intertwine.

This approach to storytelling not only documents layered past experiences but also underscores their relevance to present identities, as the stories highlight both individual and collective memory. They encapsulate the cultural and social shifts that marked the postsocialist landscape, serving as a testament to the importance of remembering. Thus, these narratives offer readers a multifaceted view of history that may resonate with their own memories.

Ultimately, literature plays a vital role in portraying alternative perspectives of the past. The narratives discussed in this study challenge official histories and provide nuanced, personal accounts that illuminate the complexity of human experiences in postsocialist societies.

REFERENCES

- Annus, Epp 2019. Sotskoloonialism Eesti NSV-s. Võim, kultuur, argielu. Tallinn, Tartu: Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus.
- Bhabha, Homi 1984. Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse. – *Discipleship: A Special Issue on Psychoanalysis* 28, 125–133.
- Böick, Marcus; Lorke, Christoph 2022. Zwischen Aufschwung und Anpassung. Eine kleine Geschichte des „Aufbau Ost“. Bonn: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung.
- Cooke, Paul 2003. Beyond a Trotzidentität? Storytelling and the Postcolonial Voice in Ingo Schulze’s “Simple Storys”. – *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 39, 3, 290–305.
- Figus, Alessandro; Pisaniello, Andrea; Mustica, Stefano 2018. Multiculturalism and Ostalgie. – *Sciendo. Geopolitical, Social Security and Freedom Journal* 1, 1, 49–60.
- Gehler, Michael 2016. Vom Glanz und Elend der Revolutionen. Die Umstürze in Mittel- und Osteuropa 1989 mit Blick auf die Jahre 2001 und 2011. – Michael Corsten, Michael Gehler, Marianne Kneuer (Hrsg.). *Welthistorische Zäsuren 1989 – 2001 – 2011*. Hildesheim, Zürich, New York: Georg Olms Verlag, 37–66.
- Heero, Aigi 2021. Siirdeaegsed valupunktid kirjandusteoste peeglis: Gohar Markosjan-Käsperi romaanid „Penelopa“ ja „Elena“. – *Philologia Estonica Tallinnensis* 6, 13–35.
- Heero, Aigi 2024. Die Wendezeit in Estland. Gohar Markosjan-Käspers Roman “Elena”. – Maris Saagpakk, Antje Johanning, Rūta Eidukevičiene, Aigi Heero (Hrsg.). *Baltische Erzähl- und Lebenswelten. Kultur-, literatur-, translations- und sprachwissenschaftliche Aspekte*. Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 149–162.
- Hennoste, Tiit 2018. Kirjandus kui vastupanu nõukogude Eestis. – *Ajalooline Ajakiri* 164/165, 2/3, 225–251.
- Hinrikus, Rutt 1997. 1990-ndate aastate Eesti proosa. – *Keel ja Kirjandus* 1, 31–36.
- Hogwood, Patricia 2013. Selective Memory: Channelling the Past in Post-GDR Society. – Anna Saunders, Debbie Pinfold (eds). *Remembering and Rethinking the GDR. Multiple Perspectives and Plural Authenticities*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 34–48.

- Hänni, Liia 2021. Maareform kui omandireformi osa. – Maareform 30. Artiklid ja meenutused. Tallinn: Maa-amet, 73–92.
- Hyland, Claire 2013. 'Ostalgie doesn't fit!': Individual Interpretations of and Interaction with Ostalgie. – Anna Saunders, Debbie Pinfold (eds.). Remembering and Rethinking the GDR. Multiple Perspectives and Plural Authenticities. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 101–115.
- Jõe, Heili 2002. Õiged valikud üleminekuühiskonnas: mis tagas edu võitjate põlvkonnale. – Ellu Saar (koost. ja toim.). Trepist alla ja üles: edukad ja ebaedukad postsotsialistlikus Eestis. Tallinn: Teaduste Akadeemia Kirjastus, 37–58.
- Jõesalu, Kirsti 2012. Eesti nõukogudejärgne mälutöö: nõukogude minevik presidentide kõnedes. – ERMi aastaraamat 55, 52–79.
- Kasemaa, Andrus 2023. Au kolhoosikorrale! Tallinn: Varrak.
- Kiwa 2021. Kummiliimiallikad. Tallinn: Tänapäev.
- Korp, Hanna Linda; Norma, Joosep 2023. Selline öudne ja tavaline. – Sirp, 13.10.
- Kowalczuk, Ilko-Sascha 2019. Die Übernahme. Wie Ostdeutschland Teil der Bundesrepublik wurde. München: C.H. Beck.
- Krien, Daniela 2020. Muldental. Zürich: Diogenes.
- Kuhn, Annette 2000. A Journey Through Memory. – Susannah Radstone (ed.). Memory and Methodology. London *et al.*: Bloomsbury, 179–296.
- Kulbok-Lattik, Egge 2008. Eesti kultuuripoliitika ajaloolisest periodiseerimisest. – Acta Historica Tallinnensia 12, 120–144.
- Lauristin, Marju; Vihalemm, Peeter; Rosengren, Karl Erik and Weibull, Lennart (eds.) 1997. Return to the Western World: Cultural and Political Perspectives on the Estonian Post-Communist Transition. Tartu: Tartu University Press.
- Lauristin, Marju; Vihalemm, Peeter 1998. Postkommunistlik siirdeaeg Eestis: Tõlgendusvõimalusi (1). – Akadeemia 10, 4, 675–701.
- Leier, Nicole 2010. Wendeliteratur – Literatur der Wende? Der Mauerfall in ausgewählten Werken der deutschen Literatur. – Info DaF 37, 5, 494–515.
- Luuk, Lilli 2022. Kolhoosi miss. Äksi: Saadjärve kunstikeskus.
- Lühmann, Michael 2021: Identitäten und Anerkennungen im Vereinigungsprozess. – Judith C. Enders, Raj Kollmorgen, Ilko-Sascha Kowalczuk (Hrsg.). Deutschland ist eins: vieles. Bilanz und Perspektiven von Trans-

- formation und Vereinigung. Frankfurt am Main, New York: Campus, 253–360.
- Norkowska, Katarzyna 2020. Polyphonie ostdeutscher Erinnerung an die DDR. Zum generationsspezifischen Narrativ in autobiographischen Schriften. – *Oxford German Studies* 49, 3, 263–280.
- Mau, Steffen 2019. Lütten Klein. Leben in der ostdeutschen Transformationsgesellschaft. Berlin: Suhrkamp.
- Meyer, Clemens 2021. Als wir träumten. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer 2021.
- Mikita, Valdur 2012. Kalevipoeg lehma seljas. – *Postimees*, 05.05.
- Mikiver, Ilmar 1996. Kodu on ilus. – *World Literature Today*, 22 December.
- Mutt, Mihkel 2012. Kooparahvas läheb ajalukku. Tallinn: Fabian.
- Müller, Rüdiger 2020. Be Careful What You Wish for: A Story of Broken Promises. Thirty Years After the Fall of the Berlin Wall. – *Europe Now Journal* 16.01. <https://www.europenowjournal.org/2020/01/15/be-careful-what-you-wish-for-a-story-of-broken-promises-thirty-years-after-the-fall-of-the-berlin-wall/> (22.07.2024).
- Mürsepp, Mari-Liis 2023. Kas ta mõtleb seda tõsiselt? – *Looming* 11. <https://www.looming.ee/arhiiv/kas-ta-motleb-seda-tosiselt/> (07.08.2024).
- Ponzi, Mauro 2019. German Difference. *Ostalgie* as a Form of Cultural Identity in Unified Germany. – *Continental Thought & Theory: A Journal of Intellectual Freedom* 2, 3, 202–223.
- Rämmer, Andu 2017. Sotsiaalse tunnetuse muutused Eesti siirdeühiskonna kontekstis. *Dissertationes sociologicae Universitatis Tartuensis* 16. Tartu: Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus.
- Sabrow, Martin 2009. Die DDR erinnern. – Martin Sabrow (Hrsg.). *Erinnerungsorte der DDR*. München: C.H. Beck, 11–27.
- Schulze, Ingo 1998. *Simple Storys*. Ein Roman aus der ostdeutschen Provinz. Berlin: dtv.
- Schneider, Wolfgang Ludwig 1997. Osis, Wessis, Besserwessis: Zur Codierung der Ost/West-Differenz in der öffentlichen Kommunikation. – *Soziale Welt. Zeitschrift für sozialwissenschaftliche Forschung und Praxis* 48, 2, 133–150.
- Sieber, Elke 2014. Erinnerung an die DDR. Zwischen (N)Ostalgie und Totalverdammung. – *Jahrbuch für historische Kommunismusforschung*. Berlin: Metropol, 17–28.

- Sierp, Aline 2009. Nostalgia for Times Past. On the Uses and Abuses of the Ostalgie Phenomenon in Eastern Germany. – *Contemporary European Studies* 4, 2, 45–58.
- Silova, Iveta; Millei, Zsuzsa; Piattoeva, Nelli 2017. Interrupting the Coloniality of Knowledge Production in Comparative Education: Postsocialist and Postcolonial Dialogues after the Cold War. – *Comparative Education Review* 61, S1, 74–102.
- Sotsiaalteadlaste avalik pöördumine 2001. – *Postimees* 22.04.
- Sztompka, Piotr 2004. The Trauma of Social Change: A Case of Postcommunist Societies. – Jeffrey C. Alexander, Ron Eyerman, Bernard Giesen, Neil J. Smelser, Piotr Sztompka (eds.). *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 155–195.
- Šmidchens, Guntis 2013. The Power of Song. Nonviolent National Culture in the Baltic Singing Revolution. *New Directions in Scandinavian Studies*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Tlostanova, Madina 2017. *Postcolonialism and Postsocialism in Fiction and Art. Resistance and Re-existence*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Thieme, Tom; Mannewitz, Tom 2021. Integration und Identität – Judith C. Enders, Raj Kollmorgen, Ilko-Sascha Kowalczyk (Hrsg.). *Deutschland 30 Jahre nach der Wiedervereinigung. – Deutschland ist eins: vieles. Bilanz und Perspektiven von Transformation und Vereinigung*. Frankfurt am Main, New York: Campus, 159–251.
- Traat, Mats 2011. Üksi rändan. Kodu on ilus. Tallinn: SE & JS.
- Vadi, Urmas 2024. Kadunud kolhoosi otsimas. – *Vikerkaar* 1–2. <https://www.vikerkaar.ee/archives/30489> (07.08.2024).
- Vogel, Berthold 1997. Arbeitslosigkeitserfahrungen im ostdeutschen Transformationsprozeß. – Karl-Siegbert Rehberg (Hrsg.). *Differenz und Integration: die Zukunft moderner Gesellschaften*. Verhandlungen des 28. Kongresses der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Soziologie im Oktober 1996 in Dresden. Band 2. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 851–855.
- Wiesenthal Helmut 1996. *Einheit als Privileg. Vergleichende Perspektiven auf die Transformation Ostdeutschlands*. Frankfurt am Main: Campus.

RESÜMEE

SIIRDEAJA HÄÄLED: POSTSOTSIALISTLIKU ELU KUJUTAMISEST SAKSA JA EESTI NÜÜDISKIRJANDUSES

Käesoleva artikli fookuses on siirdeaja kirjanduslik kujutamine Saksa nüüdiskirjanduses. Keskendudes „siirdeaja kaotajate” (sks *Wendeverlierer*) kontseptsioonile endisel Ida-Saksamaal ja analoogsetele kogemustele postsotsialistlikus Eestis, uurib artikkel, kuidas kirjandusteosed kajastavad inimeste kohanemist sotsialistlike režiimide kokkuvarisemise ajal ja selle järel. Uurimus keskendub Daniela Krieni romaanile novellides „Muldental” (2014/2020). Selleks et luua teatavat võrdluspunkti Saksa kirjandusega, tuuakse mõned näited Eesti nüüdiskirjandusest (nt Lilli Luuk, Kiwa, Mats Traat ja Andrus Kasemaa).

Teoreetilise lähenemisenurgana kasutatakse Madina Tlostanova kirjeldatud „postsotsialistliku tühimiku” mõistet. See mõiste esindab sotsiaalkultuurilist ja eksistentsiaalset lõhet, mille põhjustas sotsialistliku ühiskonna lagunemine. Analüüsis näidatakse, millisel kujul see „tühimik” inimeste eludes esineb: näiteks töökoha kaotus, kunagise isikliku staatuse drastiline muutus, teatud kujuga ühiskondlike kultuuriilmingute kadumine. Samas tuuakse esile inimeste vastupidavus, kui nad püüavad täita vana sotsiaalse korra lõppemise järel tekkinud „tühimikku”, ning näidatakse, kuidas on uues ühiskondlikus situatsioonis võimalik kasvada ja leida rahulolu mõnel muul viisil.

Nii Krieni kui ka Kasemaa teosed kasutavad fragmentaarset jutustamisvormi ehk „romaan novellides” struktuuri, mis seondub mälestuste kogumise formaadiga. See omakorda rõhutab siirdeaegsete mälestuste säilitamise olulisust ja väärtustab toonaseid isiklikke lugusid. Selline jutustamisvorm loob kogemustest mosaiigi, mis peegeldab siirdeaja keerukust ning rõhutab samal ajal inimliku mälu killustatust ja mittelinearsust. Taasjutustamise kaudu omandavad need lood ajatu mõõtme, mis kujundab kollektiivset identiteeti, dokumenteerib mitmetahulisi minevikukogemusi ja näitab, kuidas lähiminevik on kujundanud inimeste praegust identiteeti.

Daniela Krieni „Muldental” ja valitud näited Eesti nüüdiskirjandusest toovad esile Ida-Saksa ja Eesti siirdeaege ühiskonna sarnasusi ja erinevusi. Kuigi endise Ida-Saksamaa ja Eesti ajaloolised kogemused erinevad märkimisväärselt, pakuvad „siirdeaja kaotajate” ja „Teise Eesti” kontseptsioonid veenva võrdluspunkti. Mõlemad terminid hõlmavad kaotuse ja võõrandumise tunnet, mida kogesid inimesed, kes ei suutnud kohaneda uute sotsiaal-poliitiliste reaalsustega pärast sotsialistlike režiimide kokkuvarisemist.

Võtmesõnad: Daniela Krien, „Muldental”, siirdeajastu, „siirdeaja kaotajad”, „Teine Eesti”, Ida-Saksamaa, tänapäeva saksa kirjandus, tänapäeva eesti kirjandus